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ABSTRACT

The nuclear family as a vital support system is being undermined by a wide variety of direct and indirect factors. These factors include rapid technological advances, changes in socially accepted child-rearing techniques, changes in moral values, changes in acceptable sexual practices, effects of an improved educational system, effects of the Women's Liberation Movement, and the effects of role-goal conflict. Several programs have been developed to support and strengthen the nuclear family, and their success suggests directions for other similar preventive programs. (Author/SL)

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The Nuclear Family: Can It Survive the Storm?

The family unit as a social institution has existed since biblical times. Countless countries, empires and civilizations have been born, reached their zenith and faded out of existence and yet this basic nuclear unit continues to survive.

Currently, the family as a meaningful unit is under attack from widely diverse factions ranging from young hippies who depict it as anacronistic, an establishment mechanism to enforce comformity, to a nationally prominent psychiatrist, Dr. Graham B. Blaine who, in his book "Are Parents Bad for Children?" asserts that the family is failing to fulfill its basic social function of preparing our youth to be effective adults, citizens and parents. He feels that judging by today's youth, society cannot afford to place its future in the hands of a majority of today's and tomorrow's parents.

I have a healthy measure of respect for anything that has survived as long as the family unit has. I am not so quick to abandon it, although I do acknowledge that its foundations are being eroded away by various forces, some of them quite healthy in their own right. This paper seeks to explore these forces. If we can better understand the factors causing the damage, we may be able to effectively shore up the foundation before the erosion reached dangerous levels.

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One of the main-stays of the family unit in recent Western civilization has been the extended family - the close physical and psychological ties typically across three generations - grandparents, parents and children, which of course, also involves aunts, uncles and cousins. It was quite common for more than two generations to reside within the same household and typical for most members of all three generations to live within walking distance of each other, certainly

no further than a horse and buggy or trolley car ride away. The extended family provided many meaningful supports to each nuclear family unit, including advise and guidance in child rearing issues, multiple parenting, sharing of domestic responsibilities, babysitting services, and companionship for family members at home, typically adult females and children.

Parents of past generations were probably less prepared for parenthood than today's parents are, but since society is so much more complex and demanding now, hence child-raising more difficult, relatively speaking the parents of old were better prepared for their task than we are for ours. However, even more important is the fact that the extended family provided a great deal of psychological security and comfort to the new parents. If I had to choose between secure, less knowledgeable parents and anxious knowledgeable ones, I'd take the former. Indeed, research shows us that intellectually slow and even retarded parents often can do an excellent job of child rearing.

The modern mother often spends much of her day alone with her child. She frequently feels bored, lonely, unfulfilled and frustrated. She is liable to either overprotect her child and cause it to be excessively dependent upon her in order to fulfill her own needs to be needed and for companionship, or to resent her child for trapping her, causing her to be more rejecting and punitive than she might otherwise be, or some combination of the two. The extended family provided the necessary adult companionship, hence permit mother to be more relaxed and comfortable in her relationship with her child. Ironically enough, the extended family of old provided many of the things now deemed desireable by the young people of today who are experimenting with group living situations.

Despite the advantages it offers, the extended family is clearly not a viable unit for most families today. America has grown both bigger and smaller - bigger in the sense that there are so many more places for people to live; smaller

in that modern transportation makes so many more places accessible, and both serve to weaken the physical closeness of the extended family. College and the draft have drawn our young people away from the extended family at a younger age than was previously the case.

Our society places considerable emphasis on knowledge and education. Modern technology demands it. This together with the change in our approach to child rearing from an authoritarian, hierarchical model to a more permissive, democratic approach, has resulted in the youth of today asking healthy questions of their parents and being "turned off" by the enormous degree of ignorance and hypocracy in the answers. Let me cite, merely as examples, two highly charged current issues - sex and drugs. Sexuality is a very human, very natural, very crucial and very pleasureable thing. Yet from birth until marriage it is forbidden to be thought about or talked about, let alone practiced. No acceptable outlets exist. Masturbation is forbidden. It causes warts, or blindness or stunted growth or impotency. Even if you intellectually know that this is baloney, emotionally it is still an abhorent act. We discourage and prevent our children from this healthy practice and although everyone of us, males and females, has masturbated and most of us still do so occasionally, it remains heavily loaded with guilt and shame. The hetero- and homosexual experimentation of children, the petting of adolescents, and the premarital sexual functioning of young adults is similarly forbidden. Virginity is still considered the supreme virtue. And even after marriage, sexual functioning is limited - men must be assertive and women passive, oral sex is out and intercourse is limited to the missionary position - that is, the missionary on top and the native on the bottom.

Although alcohol and cigarettes pose a far greater social and health

problem than drug usage we rant and rave about the dangers of drugs, all of which supposedly result in immediate and life long addiction. We perceive the streets and school as the domain of incidiously evil pushers who seduce innocent children into trying drugs once for free so that they will immediately develop an insatiable craving and then, in order to purchase the all future supplies, have to become thieves and prostitutes and commit all sorts of unspeakable acts to secure the money to satisfy their habit.

Thank God most kids won't buy this nonsense and see through the hypocracy. The unfortunate result is loss of respect, alienation, and communication barriers commonly referred to as the generation gap. The negative effect on the family structure is obvious.

Indeed, the problem is compounded by the fact that most modern parents were reared in a more authoritarian, heirarchial atmosphere, yet have been educated to believe in a relatively more permissive, democratic approach. To a large extent, larger than is commonly realized, I believe our emotional approach to parenthood is unconsciously determined by the single most pervasive experience in family life that we have ever had, namely living in our family of origin and observing our parents in action. It is to be expected then, that many of our feelings and attitudes are similar to those of our parents. However, we have been educated to believe that a different approach is more beneficial, hence our feelings and our intellect are in conflict. As a result, to the extent that this conflict exists within us, we are more anxious, ambivalent and inconsistent in our dealings with our children.

Parenthetically, children raised within the extended family concept are exposed to a wider assortment of parenting models from which are shaped

their own future attitudes toward parenthood. On this dimension alone, I would expect parents raised in this family structure to be less rigid in their attitudes.

Dr. William Glasser in his book, The Identity Society, sheds considerable light on the question of the erosion of the family unit. He speaks of a basic attitudinal change in the younger generation as opposed to all prior generations. In the past, our approach was as he puts it, "goals before roles". First one achieves, and then, and only then, is one entitled to establish a unique, individual identity. Today's youth place "roles before goals". It is not what you accomplish but who you are that is of paramount importance. Respect and consideration must not be sacrificed for achievement. He attributes the discontent, unrest and riots that are so common in schools, on campuses, in prisons and in ghettos, to the basic conflict between the older generation's "goals before roles" philosophy and the younger generation's "roles before goals" outlook. This basic conflict exists in the family as well. He posits, and I concur, that if the older generation would recognize and understand this change, and approach the younger generation from this standpoint, the differences would be resolved. He suggests that parents let their children know that they care about them, that they are worthwhile human beings while at the same time show them enough respect to hold them responsible for their own behavior. The family is a crucial factor in determining the identity or role that the child will assume for himself. Be negative, punitive, acknowledge only his shortcomings and failures and the child will assume for himself a "failure identity" and behave accordingly. Treat him with care, love, respect, acknowledge his worth and he'll assume a responsible "success identity" or perceive himself as "I'm OK" in TA terms. With their roles ac-

knowledged, the younger generation would be only too eager to achieve the goals that the older generation desires for them.

Unfortunately, the parental generation's difficulty in accepting the cultural change that Dr. Glasser refers to as the Identity Society is intensified by the fact that vocational success in our highly technological society is more likely to require advanced educational degrees. Admission to college and schools providing degrees beyond the Bachelors is becoming more difficult, hence more competitive. The competition is creeping down the educational ladder, such that many parents are already concerned and beginning to apply pressure at the kindergarten level. Who can concern themselves with the luxury of a role, as Glasser defines it, when one's entire vocational future is at stake? Yet this is the vital concern of young people, hence the conflict with their parents becomes all the more intense.

Another storm warning threatening the family structure is the drastic changes taking place in sex roles. The Woman's Liberation Movement is in the forefront of this social upheaval. Women are demanding respect, equality and increased opportunity for self fulfillment. Glasser's roles before goals concept is clearly applicable here. I support this movement and the basic human right to seek what is personally meaningful and fulfilling, but, however beneficial in the long run, there are some undeniable detrimental effects on today's family structure. The woman no longer perceives the well being of the family as her sole responsibility in life and is no longer the major stabilizing factor within the family.

Furthermore, many women are caught between their emotional ties to motherhood and domesticity and their commitment to self fulfillment and womanhood. They have not yet assimilated the two into one integrated whole. This inevitably leads to ambivalence, anxiety and resentment which clearly affects their relationships with the other family members. Their desire

to do their "own thing" necessitates the males to become more involved in domestic activities and child rearing. Some men resent this. Others, while intellectually supporting their wives growth and intellectually aware that the existing rigid sex roles are just as limiting to them as they are to their wives, are emotionally uncomfortable assuming tasks that they have been brought up to feel are feminine. "What would the boys at the office say if they knew I sometimes washed dishes, cooked and changed diapers?" The problem is compounded by the fact that the male,not being trained to perform these functions, lacks the skill and experience to do the job. He feels clumsy, inadequate and inferior to his wife, and in addition may well resent her for placing him in this position.

An all too frequent result of all these new stress and strains on today's parents is the failure to establish a relationship that is satisfactory to both partners and the resolution of the conflict in divorce. The liberalization of divorce laws reflect, in part, an increase in the freedom of the adult individual to seek that fundamental American right to the pursuit of happiness, and a decrease in the power of the marital commitment. Again, while I personally favor liberalized divorce laws, I thing we must be aware that one result of this change at this point in time, is clearly a weakening of the family structure.

We have not established a comfortable balance between the pursuit of individual happiness and fulfillment on the one hand, and the responsibility to the family group on the other. These social changes are too new, and until an assimilation of all these forces occurs, clearly there will be slack in the lines anchoring the family. Relatively short range substitutions need to be found to draw the lines taut, hence stabilize the family structure.

Although society provides educational opportunities at many levels and on most subjects, preparation in the areas of human sexuality, marriage and

parenthood are primarily the responsibility of the family. Clearly the family is not adequately meeting these needs now. To help today's and tomorrow's parents to be better able to fulfill this responsibility, classes, seminars, workshops, discussion groups and encounter groups need to be established on a far wider basis than currently exists, to provide information, clarify values, reshape attitudes and offer constructive emotional experiences. Educational institutions, religious institutions, social agencies and mental health agencies, should all be playing this role. All levels of government should be encouraging and financing these activities.

One such program has been developed by the Convalescent Hospital for Children, which is a community mental health center for children and their families located in Rochester, New York. Being strongly committed to the concept of primary prevention, and feeling strongly that one of the best means of preventing emotional disturbances in children is having knowledgeable, confident, emotionally secure parents, a program of seminars targeted at parents of "normal" children entitled Focus on Child Development was created. These seminars seek to expose parents to both theoretical positions and practical situations. Parents are encouraged to share their feelings and experiences, hopes and fears, successes and failures, with one another under the direction and guidance of an experienced mental health professional. In essence, a support system for parents has been created. Currently two seminars have been developed and offered to the community. They are entitled Survival Techniques for Parents: The Years 6-12, and Adolescence: The Crisis Years. Evaluative data obtained from the participants of the first series of seminars (N=42) strongly indicated that the program was successful. Currently being developed is a seminar targeted at the parents of pre-schoolers. Future seminars will include Expectant Parents, Infancy, The Drug Scene and Human Sexuality: Yours and

Your Child's.

Until such time as families are able to once again assume major responsibility in these areas, indeed in preparation for this time, the parents of the day-after-tomorrow need to acquire the knowledge and experience so vital to the survival of our society from sources other than the family. Schools ought to raise these subjects to a level tantamount to reading and arithmetic.

In the primary and/or secondary schools, required courses in human sexuality, marriage, family life and family planning should be offered to boys as well as girls. Here also, all levels of government should be involved in allocating funds to develop the course material, train the teachers and purchase the necessary equipment. Religious institutions, and community groups (Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls, etc.) should similarly focus on these issues.

In order to directly strengthen the existing family unit, programs such as the Family Cluster Program, developed by Dr. Margaret Sawin, in Rochester, New York would be extremely valuable. This model seeks to provide a constructive family experience using family projects, role playing and discussion under the guidance and direction of trained leaders, who select activities and discussion so that the youngest and oldest cluster member may become involved at his/her own level of maturity. The objectives of the programs include the following:

1. To provide an intergenerational group of families who share their values and insights.
2. To provide a group setting which can grow in support and mutuality.
3. To provide an opportunity for families to consider together serious topics.

4. To provide an opportunity for families to model aspects of their family systems for each other.
5. To provide perspective for parents to observe their children in relationship to other children and children to do likewise.

The applicability of these objectives to the issues under discussion is obvious, and the fact that the Family Clusters are starting to spring up around the United States and Canada suggests that the model is viable.

Although many of the winds buffeting the nuclear family structure are necessary and constructive for the long range growth and development of both individuals and society, at the moment these waves of change are rocking the boat. Immediate activities, such as the ones mentioned above aimed at a temporary stabilization of the family unit, are desperately needed. However, I remain optimistic that the nuclear family will accomodate some of these forces, assimilate others, consequently undergo changes itself, but will survive the storm.

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